

AN OLD LOCAL HERBARIUM OF NEW SALEM,
MASSACHUSETTS

UNA F. WEATHERBY

IN the summer of 1947 my husband Alfred and I accidentally met a Mr. Gregory Smith and were given an old herbarium which had belonged to his great uncle of whom he knew little except that he had lived and died in New Salem, Massachusetts, and for sixty years or more had practiced medicine there and on his professional rounds had become interested in the flora of the region and had made a collection of the plants.

The New England Botanical Club Herbarium specializes in local flora and to get an herbarium of a very local place of a region most of which is now under water seemed desirable and Alfred said if there was sufficient data the Club would like it. Later in the fall we went down, saw the herbarium, which was mounted on newspapers sewed into a book. The specimens had been very carefully pressed and mounted and there seemed to be enough data to make it worth while so we brought it home.

Mr. Smith could give us very little information about this uncle and it seemed we had an herbarium made by Dr. George Peirce, who lived in New Salem for most of the 19th century, but that was all. [The plants were dated from around 1840 to 1850.] Alfred being of an investigating mind and above all things desiring accurate information set about to find out more about Dr. Peirce and the precise source of his herbarium specimens.

The first thing we did was to go to New Salem and make inquiries. We couldn't find any one who had known him but almost every one knew about him. Evidently he had been a doctor of reputation—locally at least. We spent a morning in the old cemetery reading every stone with a Peirce on it, and there were many, about half of them, but unfortunately there was no George Peirce. We went to all the nearby towns and investigated their cemeteries but without success. Finally we found a lady who was in charge of the little local museum in which a few mementoes of Dr. Peirce were kept also a picture of his house. He never married so had no direct heirs. We were given the name of a niece of his living in Petersham. From her we secured

the following information: George Peirce was born Feb. 5th 1808, son of Rev. Warren Peirce and Lydia Farrer, his wife. Died Oct. 14th 1896. Aged 88 years 8 months and 9 days. The unusual spelling of the name is doubtless due to the fact that they were descended from Lord Percy, hence the e before the i "as occurs in those of Irish origin."

Alfred spent many evenings at the Gray Herbarium carefully removing the specimens from the old newspapers and had labels printed and the data ready for mounting. He said to me "The old Doctor took great pains to make and press such good specimens I do want them preserved." Alfred was also writing it up for RHODORA and a few days before his death he said to me: "I have finished the Peirce article but think I'll keep it and add the names of the plants."

Professor Fernald wanted it for the next issue of RHODORA and days were spent trying to find the manuscript but it has never been found so I am doing the best I can to replace it. A letter from the above mentioned niece, Mrs. Mabel Coolidge and Alfred's reply will give all the information I have.

COOLIDGE

"Lydford Fels"

Petersham Massachusetts Sept. 29th. 1947

Mr. C. A. Weatherby:—

My dear Sir:—

Your letter seems almost too incredible to believe, as I well remember Uncle George's herbarium kept on my mother's bureau waiting to be sent according to his directions when he had no more use for it! I knew he died and it was sent while I was away from home, some fifty years ago! and I thought that was the last of it until we were preparing for a scrap drive two years ago, and overhauled every available band-box and drawer and I found the key to that herbarium which was no use to us with its principal gone. I cannot imagine why my mother didn't send it along unless it did not come to light until she had forgotten about it . . . I did find the letter of instruction for sending it . . .

I know that my mother's uncle did a marvelous work as physician during an epidemic of typhoid fever in New Salem in the summer of 1859—resulting from the stagnant waters of Miller's River in Athol and Orange, and I suppose he spent most of his life in New Salem.

He was a very gentle and patient man greatly loved by his family and fellow townsmen, and I am gratified if some of his handiwork is still in existence. . . .

Yours truly,

Mabel A. Coolidge

Dear Mrs. Coolidge:—

I have been away for a month, moving about and getting mail only occasionally; that must be my excuse for having been so long in acknowledging your kind letter of September 29th, in regard to Dr. Peirce.

I am really delighted to have the information in regard to him which you give me and the pleasant picture of the man which emerges from what you and the people at New Salem have told me. If the key to the herbarium turns up, I shall be much pleased to have that too, for in some cases the information in regard to the specimens which we need for scientific purposes is lacking, and the key might supply it.

Yes, the herbarium was given to us by Gregory Smith, now, as you very likely know, an artist at Old Lyme, Connecticut, and quite accidentally. Mr. Smith was in charge, last summer, of the exhibition of the Old Lyme Art Association, which my wife (who is interested in art) and I are in the habit of visiting. In conversation with him the fact that I am a botanist was casually mentioned; he then told me of the herbarium which he had kept out of sentiment, but now felt, since none of his family were interested, that, if it were of any use, it should be placed in some institution. It proves to be an excellent collection, comprising a good representation of the flora of New Salem beautifully pressed and mounted and accurately named. Some of the specimens are from localities now under the waters of the Quabbin Reservoir.

The collection probably was made between 1840 and 1850; the style and paper of the book and the fact that he obviously used in naming his plants works of John Torrey, the latest of which was published in 1843, indicate that. Had they been worked up much after 1850 he would almost certainly have used Gray's or Wood's manual.

With my hearty thanks,

Sincerely yours,

C. A. Weatherby.

Mr. Weatherby died before the work was completed but Mr. F. W. Hunnewell has recently had the plants mounted and at long last, after a hundred years, the painstaking work of an amateur botanist has come to rest in a place where it may be useful.

FLOWERING ARUNDINARIA GIGANTEA IN ILLINOIS.—Botanists and plant collectors are aware of erratic and infrequent flowering of *Arundinaria gigantea* (Walt.) Muhl.; a species of cane usually found in lowland areas which may be flooded annually. During early July 1951 the writer visited an area west of Sandusky in Alexander County, Illinois, in which two colonies of cane were observed. In this locality *A. gigantea* produced short, leafy, flowering culms profusely, but another colony about 500 yards distant showed no flowering culms.